

The Unique Difficulties Faced by Working Women Due to COVID-19

While everyone in the business world has been affected by the COVID pandemic, studies show that working mothers have been negatively impacted the most by the health crisis and its ripple effects across the economy. Earlier this year, McKinsey & Company issued a report titled, “For Mothers in the Workplace, a Year (and Counting) Like No Other,” that confirmed what many companies already suspected: working mothers have left their jobs in record numbers.

According to the report, although women make up 48% of the workforce, they account for nearly 56% of resignations since the start of the pandemic. Last fall, at the same time that many schools struggled to find the safest model of instruction for their students – all virtual, partly virtual, or all in-person – the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that nearly 80% of the 1.1 million people who left the labor force were women. These declines hit Black, Latina and Asian women the hardest.

Causes of the She-Cession

Industry analysts attribute the large drop in women’s employment to the confluence of financial difficulties, childcare challenges, and profound lack of work-life balance. With young children unable to attend corporate-sponsored or independent childcare centers that had closed due to safety concerns, many working mothers needed to attend to their children during the hours when they would have been doing their jobs. School-aged children often required extensive help navigating remote learning via computers. After-school programs were

canceled. Meal preparation for the entire family’s day often fell to working women and increased at-home time led to additional household chores. Where friends or family could help out with babysitting and running errands prior to the pandemic, concerns about catching or transmitting the virus meant that families with children were often completely isolated, and on their own.


More Facets of the Problem

Jobs that have a historically female-dominated workforce were disproportionately affected by the economic slowdowns and shutdowns of the past year.

- Many more women than men were responsible for childcare and at-home tutoring and supervision of students due to school closures.
- Women generally harbored a greater fear of contracting COVID, while simultaneously working in the types of jobs with greater exposure to the public.
- Increased household responsibilities forced many working mothers— and especially Black and Latina mothers — to reduce their work hours or leave their jobs entirely, further widening economic and racial disparities.

The Work Still Got Done, But at What Cost?

Many employees working in-person office jobs pivoted successfully to remote jobs, sometimes by squeezing in work before or after regular office hours. Managers accepted flexible schedules during the pandemic, and 79% of fathers rated themselves as “efficient” while working from home. In fact, more than 70% of those men agreed that working from



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home had a positive impact on their mental well-being. Perhaps unsurprisingly, fewer than 40% of moms felt that way, because housework and childcare were predominately undertaken by women, lining up with traditional gender expectations. For the most part, however, the work got done. According to a recent Mercer study, productivity was the same as or higher than it was before the pandemic in 94% of 800 companies surveyed.

But that efficiency took a toll. The stress of performing well on the job while caring for children and running a household full-time through the COVID period had many mothers questioning whether a 9-5 office job was worth the mental and emotional cost. In fact, beyond financial and employment crises, the pandemic also created a deeper mental health crisis among working mothers. Both depression and anxiety were already far more prevalent in women and the pandemic exacerbated that disparity.

Helping Working Mothers During the Pandemic and Beyond

During lockdown, most employers offered moms in white color jobs the flexibility to work from home and work different hours in order to cope with new responsibilities that came with pandemic life. For hourly and essential workers, efforts were made to shift schedules or transfer employees to locations with shorter commutes. But indefinitely juggling the full-time jobs of motherhood and a career over 18-hour days was not sustainable, as is evidenced by the mass exodus of women from the working world.

Some long-term solutions might include:

Reassessing workplace norms to prioritize healthy work-life balance. Be open to hybrid modes of employment. Continue to offer flexibility on work hours and evaluate the necessity of in-person meetings during the day.

- Women-focused “returnships.” These are programs to reintroduce women who’ve fallen out of the workplace due to COVID, unemployment, or any other reason related to their status as a mother. JPMorgan Chase, Intuit, Accenture and more U.S. businesses have returnship programs offering supportive pathways back into the workforce after career breaks.
- Cash subsidies to help working moms enlist quality childcare at a more manageable cost. A childcare subsidy benefit allows your employees to hire in-home help, or enroll their children in full-time, part-time, or drop-in care at early learning centers, helping them manage their schedule in ways they feel good about.

Looking to the Future

As the pandemic wanes, employers will have many new, creative opportunities to help working mothers succeed in their jobs – even if that means that life in the office never “gets back to normal.” By offering wellness programs that focus on mental health and leveraging dependent care accounts, your company can have a positive impact on mothers’ work-life balance, while also reducing turnover, absenteeism, and burn-out.



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